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## BOOKS

# A game of 42 is a Texas tradition



Nellie Doneva/Reporter-News Players get ready for another game of 42.

*By Scott Kirk, Special to the Reporter-News*

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Dennis Roberson believes he knows the reason why 42, the quintessential domino game in Texas, is played in every part of the Lone Star State and virtually nowhere else.

"Who in their right mind is ever going to leave Texas?" asked Roberson of a lunch time crowd at the West Texas Book Festival at the Abilene Public Library Wednesday. Roberson may have become the first author in the history of the festival to conclude his remarks and book signings by setting down with his audience to play 42.

When it comes to chronicling the history of the game, Roberson, the tournament manager for the Dean & Deluca (better known as the

Colonial) Invitational PGA golf tournament in Fort Worth, literally wrote the book. Roberson's book, "Winning 42," first written in the early 1990s, is in its fourth edition.

The game, referred to unofficially as the "National Game of Texas" and officially as the state domino game, was birthed in the 1880s by two boys, Walter Earl and William Travis, who were tired of getting whippings for playing cards, considered in virtually every religious circle in 19th century Texas as the devil's game. What they came up with was a card game played with dominos.

Roberson, who describes himself as a third generation 42 player, said the game is timeless for a simple reason.

"I don't know any game that minimizes luck and maximizes skill as much," he said.

By the 1940s, 42 was played everywhere in the state, but until Roberson came along, no one had thought to write about it. Well, that might not be exactly true. Roberson said his father, who faced a dire professional situation in the 1970s, planted the idea with his son.

"My dad lost his job in the '70s," said Roberson. "He was 49 and he had three kids who were getting ready to go to college."

In pondering what he might do, one option was, "I might write a book about 42."

Getting the book published turned out to be more problematic. Roberson contacted the presses at University of Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Christian, Southern Methodist and Texas Tech. The only bite he got was from Texas Tech, where the woman who ran the press, while not from Texas, was fascinated about how a game could capture generations of a diverse state.

The book is a combination of 42 strategy and stories that Roberson gleaned from sending out surveys.

"As I did the survey, one of the neatest things was hearing these old stories," said Roberson.

One came from one of Roberson's friends, Tim Lewelling, a Weatherford native who taught and coached in DeLeon in the 1980s. Lewelling went to college in Oklahoma, whose denizens, he was shocked to learn, had never heard of 42. That revelation made Lewelling wonder if anyone outside of Weatherford played the game.

He found out that DeLeon was a hotbed, particularly at the feed and seed store, where an older gentleman, Bob Solomon, meted out daily beatings on the 42 table.

"He was an aggressive bidder and a man of few words," Lewelling remembered. "I don't know if he ever knew my name. He'd just say, 'You want to play 42?'"

The later editions of Roberson's book included stories from Texas celebrities who grew up playing the game. One of the celebs, Bill Moyers of public television fame, recalled 42 as part of the landscape while he was growing up in East Texas.

"You didn't learn 42," said Moyers. "It's in your DNA, or you're lost."

Roberson was told by the University of Texas that 42 was a dying game that would have no interest in a younger generation consumed by video games. Roberson is happy to point out that you can play 42 online, although it's difficult to imagine how the romance of 42 can be replicated without the sound of dominos being shuffled on a table.

"I think you're seeing it more now," said Roberson, who said it is common to see players in their 30s at tournaments or, when you get around the Bryan-College Station area, students from Texas A&M. If Roberson had a part in helping 42 remain popular, he'll take his bow.

"We kept it from dying," he said.

Roberson not only wrote the book to tell the stories, but also to teach people how to play and how to understand the intricacies of bidding.

"I wanted people to be able to learn the game from scratch from this book, or I had failed," he said.

To test his theory, he had his wife learn the game from reading his book. Roberson said his wife can hold her own against anyone.

He also wanted his father, who died this year, to read the book to see if it "passed muster." His father gave him perhaps his most ringing endorsement.

"He said, 'Son, you're giving away all the family secrets,'" said Roberson.

### **IF YOU GO:**

What: West Texas Book Festival

Thursday: The Culinary Cuisine Luncheon and Texas Cookbook Gala are both sold out.

Friday: Lunch at the Library featuring Chad Conine, author of "The Republic of Football: Legends of the Texas High School Game."

Noon. Abilene Public Library. Free. Getting Published Workshop, 2-3:30 p.m., Abilene Public Library. Free.

Saturday: Author Presentations, 8-11:30 a.m. Abilene Civic Center.

Free. Books & Boots Luncheon, 11:45 a.m. The reservation deadline has passed.

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